

Rekindling the Literary Romance

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As a graduate student at The Ohio State University from 2005 to 2011, I was inundated with ideology critique. Most of my professors came to professional age in the 1980s and 90s at the height of High Theory, New Historicism, and the hermeneutics of suspicion, and that largely influenced their approaches in the classroom. As an undergraduate, I had reveled in the pleasures of reading the sonnets of John Donne, the novels of Mary Shelley, the poetry of William Wordsworth and John Keats and T.S. Eliot and Louise Erdrich. But in grad school, it seemed that we were discussing Michel Foucault more than Victorian novels; Karl Marx more than Romantic poetry; socio-historical contexts more than literary form and aesthetics. My favorite authors and their texts were suddenly exposed as ideological byproducts and empty containers of meaningless signifiers, their ideas as illusory veils behind which were hidden structures of power. I despaired a bit during my first two years of grad school. This wasn't what I had signed up for. This was a rather dark, serious, negative way of reading texts. Where was the pleasure? Where was the admiration? Where was the love?

Rita Felski asks similar questions in *The Limits of Critique*, and she articulates many of the thoughts and feelings I've had in my complicated and evolving relationship to critique over the past decade. The training I received in graduate school was of course invaluable: while I was overly dramatic in my aversion to ideology critique at first, I learned much from its hermeneutics: how to investigate a text carefully, how to be patient and dogged in my analyses, how to read critically. But, as Felski argues, ideology critique is only one method of reading. And it's a method that has become predictable and boring—and often counterproductive, especially when it comes to justifying “why literature matters,” as we are often called upon to do. Ideological criticism comes at the text from an attitude of “fear, anger, curiosity, and repugnance,” one “oriented toward the bad rather than the good,” and one that presumes “the worst about the motives of others” (p. 37). The result is ripping apart literary texts to reveal “hidden and questionable motives” (p. 3), to show that there's not much positive to take away from the text itself. That's not exactly a persuasive reason to study literature!

As a graduate student, I was caught between learning the new language of ideology critique and attempting to rekindle the love of literature that inspired me to go to grad school in the first place. Having no previous experience with Foucault, Freud, or Derrida, I found myself reading theory (which brought me little pleasure) more than literature, and my writing suffered for several years. I was negotiating what Felski calls “ideological” and “theological” styles of criticism (p. 29), and I was losing my passion for literature. Often opposed to the theoretical and methodological stances of my professors, I also felt unable to write from a place of sympathy for and attachment to the authors I studied. How could I be appropriately critical if I actually liked Wordsworth, let alone loved him? I was stuck in what Felski calls the “critical mood” of critique (pp. 20-1). Eventually, I was able to break free from this mood by assimilating and internalizing key moves and tools of ideology critique with my own interests and pleasures in reading literary texts. This resulted in part from a “f*** it” attitude, and in part from an intensive study of the history of literary criticism, akin to what Felski sketches in chapter one of her book. For candidacy exams, my primary field was nineteenth-century British literature and my focus area was Critical Theory. My dissertation was originally titled “Romanticism Redeemed,” and I sought to, well, redeem (or rescue) my beloved poets from the vicious attacks of ideology critique. Many of my seminar papers began with a lengthy distancing of my reading from new historicism, and a justification of why this was a valid approach. My dissertation, which I've since revised as a [forthcoming book](#), was on the concept of love in Romantic poetry, and it was/is a rather loving approach to the authors I love to read.

In a strange way, then, I feel that I have somewhat enacted what Felski calls “postcritical reading,” even though I’d never heard the term before reading *The Limits of Critique*. I also had no understanding of actor-network theory before reading *The Limits of Critique*, but much of what Felski outlines reflects the trajectory of my own evolving approach to reading literature. The kind of postcritical reading she advocates is one that makes room for affective engagements with literature apart from suspicion and skepticism, a reading that is affirmative rather than negative. Postcritical reading, as I understand it, is “post” in the sense that we’re no longer bound to the old scriptures of High Theory and suspicion; instead of turning to the past and uncovering what the text gets wrong and how it fails, we get out in front of the text and reflect on “what in unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (p. 12). One way to do this is via actor-network theory, which Felski focuses on in chapter five. Basically, she advocates getting rid of everything negative associated with critique; doing so opens up a new kind of interpretation as “a coproduction between actors that brings new things to light rather than an endless rumination on a text’s hidden meanings or representational failures” (p. 174). By reading literary texts as “nonhuman actors” in a vast social network that is transhistorical and transpersonal, we can change the mood of criticism. Literary texts are suddenly sociable, fun, playful, interesting, exciting, unpredictable. They make attachments to other actors—the kinds of attachments most of us make when we read without theory anyway. But this isn’t some kind of idealistic, make-you-feel-good approach to literature, because we still retain the tenets of close, critical reading—it’s just that the mood (and thus perspective) has shifted.

As a demonstration of how this applies to my own work, I’ve attached the opening paragraphs from the introduction to my forthcoming book, *Amorous Aesthetics: Intellectual Love in Romantic Poetry and Poetics, 1788-1853* (Liverpool UP, 2018)—which I wrote before reading Felski! The book is still fairly historicist—I don’t really do the transhistorical thing Felski advocates, though that does inform my close readings of poems in individual chapters—but it’s clearly not within the tradition of ideology critique. I approach Romantic poetry from a position of love and pleasure and sympathy and joy—even though I’m critiquing critique, as does Felski.

At the same time, not everyone is thrilled with Felski’s assessment of critique. I realize my response to Felski is informed by my own experiences and proclivities. Others don’t share my aversion to ideology critique, and others don’t see new historicism and ideology critique as the dominant/required approach to literary studies (the “Theories and Methodologies” cluster in the March 2017 issue of *PMLA* attests to the broad range of reactions to her book). Moreover, recent graduate students might not have been exposed to the full force of critique as I was in the 2000s. But the point isn’t to get rid of critique—Felski makes this point in her conclusion. The point is to de-throne critique in order to legitimize other forms of reading. Here, I’m reminded of a small writing assignment in my literature survey courses. In addition to the “formal,” “critical” essays that students write, I also have them write a “reflective” essay where they select the one text they have felt most attached/connected to during the semester, explaining why they feel that way and what the text means to them personally. These essays are consistently more engaged, thoughtful, and meaningful than their “critical” essays, so much so that I’m reconsidering how I approach papers in all of my classes. Beginning from a place of appreciation, sympathy, and admiration seems more productive than beginning from a place of skepticism, suspicion, and critique. Perhaps that’s an obvious conclusion, but it’s one worth reiterating in our current climate of doubt, suspicion, and negativity.

Excerpt from *Amorous Aesthetics* (please do not publish!)

Amorous Aesthetics is grounded in a simple observation: Romantic poets use ‘love’ in their writings far more often than ‘nature’ and ‘imagination’, yet this remains unacknowledged in Romantic scholarship. One reason is that Romanticism has been built on the pillars of nature and imagination: these two concepts attain a unique significance during the Romantic period that influences contemporary thought. From the Romantics’ nascent environmentalism to their idea of the self to their various psychological and scientific approaches to cognition, nature and imagination remain central to understanding major texts of the period. A second reason for this situation is the imprecise and often idealized meaning of love itself, which makes it more convenient to dismiss love as sentimental or as an ideological smokescreen rather than to take it seriously. An earlier tradition of criticism cast Romantic love as a predominantly ‘unifying and cohesive force’, and that notion of idealized love has proven powerfully persuasive. In his seminal 1971 study of Romantic love, Frederick Beaty argued that the Romantics sought reconciliation of the earthly and spiritual through love; love, in other words, *is* transcendence. Historians similarly locate in the Romantic period a revival what Denis de Rougemont calls paganism’s ‘mystical union’ of divine love, effectually spiritualizing the erotic. Jerome McGann and subsequent new historicists would later critique this characterization of love as part of the Romantic Ideology: since the 1980s, scholars generally link love to Romantic imagination and aesthetics as attempts to transcend politics and escape the material world. Romantic love, then, is typically associated with an idealized, intellectual form of love in contradistinction to a ‘realist’ tradition that sees such forms of intellectual idealism ‘as unverifiable, contrary to science, and generally false to what appears in ordinary experience’. However, as the rise of affect studies and the field of literature and science suggests, we need to take a second look at emotions, including love, in Romantic literature.

The ‘affective turn’ in the humanities and social sciences allows *Amorous Aesthetics* to take up this challenge by recovering the tradition of intellectual love in Romantic poetry and poetics. As we move beyond resistance to ‘emotional readings’ made suspicious by the ‘affective fallacy’, as well as the hermeneutics of suspicion championed by new historicism, we can see the notion of Romantic love anew. As I demonstrate in this book, Romantic love, and intellectual love in particular, was interwoven with the scientific and philosophical discourses of the period. Poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, John Clare, and Felicia Hemans collectively develop a tradition of intellectual love steeped in the interconnectedness of thought and feeling, at the levels of the personal, the political, the scientific, and the ecological. In contrast to studies that tend to see love and other major Romantic concepts as ideological illusions into which poets retreat from the material realities of their time, *Amorous Aesthetics* demonstrates how seemingly inward-turning and escapist moves are also outward-turning engagements with the social world. As with the concepts of nature and imagination, the transcendence and idealism often tied to Romantic love remains grounded in science, sociality, and critical thought.

This recovery of Romantic love is important because Romanticism looks much different when we foreground love. While some work has been done on sex, sexuality, and romantic attachment in Romantic-era literature, as well as a range of studies on the ‘dark’ emotions, I am interested in how poets treat love as a concept through which they envision being itself. Whether it is Erasmus Darwin’s scientific treatment of the emotions in *The Loves of the Plants*, Wordsworth’s claim in *The Prelude* for the preeminence of ‘intellectual love’, Shelley’s revelation in *A Defence of Poetry* that love is ‘the great secret of morals’, or Hemans’s consistent emphasis on ‘the affections’, love as both a feeling and a concept proves to be a prominent feature of Romanticism. This study thus joins recent scholarship on aesthetics, affect theory, and science that has reinvigorated discussions regarding the role of feeling and emotion in cognition, action, and culture. I show that Romantic-era writers conceived of intellectual love as integral to broader debates about the nature of life, the biology of the human body, the sociology of human relationships, the philosophy of nature, and the disclosure of being.